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## SOME MERITS AND DEFECTS OF THE FRENCH COLONIAL SYSTEM

PROF. WILLIAM BENNETT MUNRO  
*Harvard University*

At the close of the Napoleonic wars the colonial empire of France had reached the lowest point in its history. Of the very extensive territories which the Bourbon monarchy had accumulated during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, there remained in America only a few small islands in the Gulf of St. Lawrence and the Caribbean; in Africa only Senegal, Reunion and Madagascar (the latter practically abandoned); and in Asia only Pondicherry and a few small trading posts on the mainland of India. France had been forced to yield her place among the great colonizing powers of the world.

The course of events during the nineteenth century, however, has on more than one occasion borne testimony to the marvelous recuperative power of the French people; and in no more striking respect has this power been shown than in the development of new interests beyond the seas. Through the acquisition of Algeria and other important territories in Africa, and the assumption of protectorates over Tunis, Madagascar and extensive regions in Indo-China, the French have regained for themselves a place second only to Great Britain among the colonial powers of the present day.

The Revolutionary and Napoleonic era marks, therefore, a decisive turning-point in the colonial policy of France, as it does in the other domains of French administration. Indeed the student of comparative colonization will find, in the present system, very little that may properly be looked upon even as a heritage of the old régime; for after 1815 the old ideas of colonial government and the old methods of centralized control were so far abandoned as to leave between the old colonial system and the new scarcely a single connecting link.

One important feature which marked the administration of the French colonies before the Revolution was the vigorous endeavor to secure absolute uniformity in the governance of all the dependencies, with little provision for differences in local conditions. Despite the

enormous disparity in point of environment and in the kind of problems likely to arise, the French dominions in Canada, for instance, were given frameworks of administration which were substantially like those employed in India, and were subjected to almost the same supervisory methods. The home government, as De Tocqueville has remarked, essayed to take the place of Providence by applying its infallible formulas of administration to all the Bourbon dependencies alike.

This passion for uniformity and symmetry the French have, indeed, carried down into several fields of contemporary home administration, notably into the sphere of local government; for one finds more than 36,000 communes, with populations ranging from fifty to half a million, all provided with the exactly same administrative machinery and supervised in precisely the same way. In the contemporary colonial system of France, however, this inelasticity is noticeably absent. Although the dependent territories of the republic are now almost wholly within the category of "tropical dependencies," and although they differ from one another far less widely than did the colonies of the old régime, no serious attempt is made to conform the administration of all to any single plan or theory. On the contrary, the present system exhibits entire flexibility both in the methods of supervising colonial affairs from home, and in the organizations of the colonies themselves.

Algeria, the most important of the French dependencies, is treated as an integral part of France. Like the other local units of the republic, it comes under the supervision of the minister of the interior; it has its share of representation in the French parliament; and its organization, both of departmental and of local government, conforms generally to that of France itself. The protectorates, including Tunis and the larger part of Madagascar, are under the supervision of the minister of foreign affairs, but they retain their own local organization. All the remaining French territories—the colonies proper—are in charge of the minister of colonies. There is now, therefore, a decentralization of control which contrasts very strongly with the excessive centralization of the old dominion, and even with the very symmetrical policy which characterizes other branches of French administration at the present day. This division of control has, on the whole, been advantageous; for it has helped to give French colonial policy in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries an elasticity which it utterly lacked in the eighteenth, and it has

likewise served to mitigate that pernicious faith in administrative shibboleths which has too often been the curse of French politics both at home and abroad.

One feature which serves to distinguish the present colonial system of France from that of Great Britain, Germany or the United States, is the practice of giving to dependent territories a certain representation in the official councils of the mother state. Algeria, being regarded as part of France, has of course its quota of representatives—three senators, representing the three departments of Algiers, Oran, and Constantine, and six deputies, selected two from each department. The election procedure is to all intents and purposes the same as in France, the franchise being confined to Frenchmen and naturalized Europeans.

The protectorates, including Tunis, have no representation at all in the French parliament although the degree of control exercised over them is fully as great as in several other territorial dependencies. Of the score or more of "colonies proper," only seven have the right to send representatives<sup>1</sup>—Martinique, Guadeloupe, French Guiana, Senegal, French India, and Cochín-China; to others not less important—as Tonkin, Cambodia, Dahomey, French Congo—no rights of representation are given. For this discrimination there are historical reasons only. The colonies represented are, it will be noted, the older dependencies, which acquired their right during a period when the idea of a gradual assimilation of the colonies to the mother country was regarded as the true goal of colonial administration. This idea, indeed, dominated French statesmanship until less than two decades ago, when it gave place to the notion that neither assimilation nor yet mere exploitation, but a mean between the two, should be attempted. Of late, therefore, the French authorities have not looked with favor upon any movement to carry the system of colonial representation to its logical conclusion by according the privilege to the newer colonies. On the contrary, on more than one occasion, it has been seriously proposed to withdraw the right of representation from those colonies which now possess it.

<sup>1</sup> The privilege of sending representatives was first accorded to the colonies during the Revolution; but it was abolished by the constitution of the year viii and was not restored till 1848. In 1852 it was again suppressed by the Second Empire, but was reestablished in 1870 by the government of the national defense, which in 1875 made it a constitutional fixture. Since then decrees regulating its exercise have been issued from time to time.

Among the seven colonies now holding the privilege, no rational basis of representation is established, senators and deputies being allotted without any due regard for differences in population, in area, in wealth, or in contributions to the national exchequer. The distribution, so far as it goes, rests upon a purely arbitrary basis. Martinique, Guadaloupe, and Reunion have each one senator and two deputies; French India has one senator and one deputy; French Guiana, Senegal and Cochinchina have each a deputy but no senators. Thus the three small islands of Martinique, Guadaloupe and Reunion have a larger representation than that of all the other colonies put together, a share which is, indeed, equal to that of the whole dependency of Algeria. That Algeria, with its five millions of population, should be entitled to no greater representation than the three islands, with only five hundred thousand, is a proposition so difficult to maintain, that the colonies have in some quarters come to be regarded as the "rotten boroughs" of the French political system. Any attempt at a redistribution would, however, serve only to open the whole question as to the merits and defects of the system of colonial representation, a discussion which none of the leading French political parties seem to desire.

The methods by which the various dependencies select their representatives afford further illustrations of the elasticity of the system. In Algeria, as has been said, the natives do not vote at all. In Martinique, Guadaloupe, and Reunion they hold the franchise on equal terms with Frenchmen, and the same is substantially true of Senegal. In French India and in French Guiana they have a right to vote, but not on equal terms with the French inhabitants; yet even with the handicap they hold a dominant hand in the elections. In Cochinchina they are almost entirely shut out, and the French residents are in control. The arrangements in each case are made by special decrees issued from time to time since 1870, each seeking to meet the circumstances of the particular colony in question.

Except for this variation in the franchise from colony to colony, the electoral methods pursued in the dependencies are much like those at home. Voting lists, compiled under the same sort of regulations, are used both in the election of deputies and in the local elections; the voting takes place (except in Senegal) by written ballot; the colonial representatives are paid out of the national purse, and they enjoy at Paris all the privileges and legal immunities of the regular French members of parliament. In the chambers they possess the

right to discuss and to vote upon every project, whether it is likely to affect the interests of the colonies or not, a right which they have not hesitated to use.

Although the system of colonial representation has not been without its very distinct advantages, particularly in affording the colonies a recognized official channel through which their grievances might be effectively set forth, it has, without doubt, fallen far short of expectations. In a senate of three hundred and a chamber of six hundred members, the colonial representatives form so insignificant an element that their voting strength is scarcely sufficient to make their support worth the interest of any of the leading political factions. During the last decade they have swung mainly into the ranks of the socialist party, and have on the whole found place more generally among the opponents than among the supporters of the administration. On somewhat rare occasions men of marked ability have been sent to Paris from the colonies; but in the main the colonial senators and deputies have not risen to the general level. In this respect one marks a notable contrast between the delegation from the colonies and the little group sent regularly from Algeria, the latter deputation setting a distinctly high standard, and in the considerable number of members which it has furnished to recent French ministries fully justifying its existence. That the colonies proper, on the contrary, have not on the whole risen to their opportunities in the matter of representation is shown by the caliber of the men whom they sometimes choose, men like the Indian deputy from Pondicherry, for instance, whose corrupt manipulations became a public scandal, or like the negro deputy from Martinique who, after his election, refused to proceed to Paris because he had been warned by spirits not to venture upon the seas.

Not infrequently the colonies select as their representatives men who have already taken an active part in French politics at home; but in the main this practice is not followed. In either case, the objection is often made that the colonial deputies interest themselves too prominently in the purely domestic politics of the republic, and too frequently lose sight of the special colonial interests which they are supposed to guard. One is often reminded, in this connection, of the important occasion upon which a French ministry was ousted from office upon an interpellation relating to a purely local matter, the sponsor for which was the deputy for Cochinchina. Although this colonial deputy was perfectly within his parliamentary rights in

embarrassing the government at a very critical moment upon a question relating to a central *mairie* for Paris, many Frenchmen naturally ventured to raise the question whether his energies might not have been more appropriately employed. From the very nature of things, a colonial representative enjoys in parliamentary circles a certain amount of prestige and special influence; and these advantages, it is claimed, he too often uses improperly.

The methods by which senators and deputies are selected in the colonies have also been rather harshly criticised. There are those, indeed, who urge vigorously and with a good deal of circumstantial evidence to support them, that the colonial representatives do not in many cases faithfully reflect the public opinion of the colonies from which they are accredited. In support of these allegations, it is pointed out that the natives who have voting rights do not exercise these rights in any reasonable degree. The proportion of polled to registered votes is, no doubt, discouragingly small in almost all the colonies at every election; and this is not because the French element in the colonies seeks in any sinister way to throw obstacles in the way of native voting. On the contrary, it appears that rival French leaders very eagerly exploit the native vote, and are frequently charged with bringing natives to the polls through corruption, undue influence, or even open intimidation. Were the native voters left alone, it is believed that even the present meager showing would be considerably reduced.

In view of the small percentage of native votes polled, and especially in view of the notorious activity of French officials in connection with the colonial elections, it is indeed questionable whether the colonial deputies sometimes represent much more than the official class in the colonies. The influence of this large official class, particularly with the native leaders, is obviously very great, and no doubt is usually exerted to the full in an endeavor to secure the election of representatives satisfactory to itself. It has been shown in a parliamentary investigation in Senegal that these functionaries make their arrangements with the native chiefs, who conduct their followers in bands to the polls, where they indicate their choice according to instructions. The chiefs, it seems, are the only factors to be reckoned with, each village headman having a voting strength of one, two, or three hundred ballots, as the case may be. The whole proceeding thus becomes a *farce électorale*, the representative chosen being usually some one whom the native voters have never seen and of whom most of them have never heard. Cases are on

record in which deputies have been chosen to represent colonies which they have never even visited, their electoral campaigns being managed by officials on the ground. The deputy, owing his election to the officials, is thereby committed to their support; and the exertion of influence proceeds in a circle, sometimes with exceedingly vicious effects.

In all the represented colonies except Cochin-China the native element has a decisive numerical preponderance; and even where it has not equal weight with the French it is nevertheless strong enough to control the elections. This the French inhabitants regard as a substantial grievance; for the natives contribute only insignificant sums to the exchequer, and, with a few unimportant exceptions, furnish no recruits to the military establishment; whereas the colonial Frenchmen bear the brunt of financial and military burdens, and yet are allotted only a minor share in the choice of those who assume to represent the wishes of the colony in the councils of the nation. Hence the system which was designed to harmonize the interests of the two elements in the colonies seems to have exerted an influence in exactly the opposite direction. As a theory, the extension of the franchise to tropical natives had much that served to commend it to the French people, particularly in view of the prevailing democratic temper of 1848 and 1870; but in its practical workings it has been productive of discontent, anomalies and even abuses. Paul Leroy-Beaulieu does not hesitate to condemn the electoral system of the colonies as an "absurd institution;" and there seems to be a growing conviction that there is ample room for its reform.

One aspect of the question which has elicited discussion in recent years relates to the bearing which the system of colonial representation has upon the question of political development within the colonies themselves. In the colonies of France the march to colonial autonomy, or toward anything approaching autonomy, has been extremely slow; in none of them is there yet the faintest recognition of this principle. Elective assemblies have, it is true, long since been established in several of the dependencies; in some the members of these local bodies are elected on a basis of manhood suffrage pure and simple, in others by complicated plans which provide, or attempt to provide, for the representation of interests rather than for the representation of numbers; but in none is the elective organ able to exercise any important control over the actions of the executive. One may even doubt whether the influence of these elective



organs over the conduct of administration is a whit greater today than it was when the system of local representative government was inaugurated—in some cases more than a quarter of a century ago. It is now over sixty years since we were assured by Lord Durham, in his epoch-marking *Report on the Affairs of British North America*, that the grant of representative government to a colony must be followed in time by the grant of responsible government. It is a vain illusion, Durham declared, to expect that those who represent the people in any colony will permanently content themselves with a mere voice in legislation; they will inevitably insist upon administrative control. That the one fact does not as assuredly and as readily follow the other as Durham supposed, the history of the French dependencies seems to show; and it is possible that the practice of affording the colonies a liberal representation in the home parliament has not been without its influence in this direction. One of the most powerful among the various causes which assisted in securing political autonomy for the larger colonies of Great Britain was the tardy, but none the less effective, recognition by the British parliament of its own ignorance and utter helplessness in dealing with the local problems of distant colonies. Had the British parliament numbered among its own members men who held mandates from the colonial possessions, this recognition of helplessness would in all probability not have come so soon, and parliament might reasonably have continued to assume its ability to legislate intelligently for the various colonies. It is true, one may hasten to add, that political conditions in the French and British colonies differ so widely as to forbid one to reason from analogy; but the fact seems to remain that anything which serves to foster in the minds of home legislators an idea of their own capability to deal with the local affairs of distant dependencies must in the nature of things have its place among the obstacles in the way of colonial autonomy.

The French government of the present day, therefore, aware that a half century of experience has not served to stamp with marked success its ventures along the path of political assimilation, finds itself in the somewhat awkward predicament of not being ready to carry the principle of colonial representation to its logical conclusion. On the other hand, it cannot easily withdraw the representative privilege from those colonies to which it has been accorded; for the system has come to be regarded, both in France and in the colonies, as an incident of republicanism, since it was established by the first

republic, revived by the second, and made a constitutional fixture by the third. For sentimental reasons, then, if for nothing more, the elimination of the colonial representatives need hardly be looked for in the very near future. The French have halted, accordingly, between the Spanish and Portuguese systems, which accord representation to all dependent territories, and the British system, which grants representation to none.

Whatever the outcome to the colonies may be, to the student of comparative colonization the experiment in colonial representation has not been without its distinct value; for, though it is not safe to generalize broadly from the working of a system which has scarcely had a complete or sympathetic trial, it is certain that the difficulties encountered by France are substantially those which are likely to be encountered by England or by any other country which attempts, on a broad scale, to inaugurate and maintain any plan of imperial federation which gives the colonies representation in the home parliament. The difficulties involved in securing an equitable basis of representation, the questions how far and under what handicaps tropical natives should share in the right to elect, the problem of protecting the natives against political exploitation and of holding the political activities of colonial functionaries within proper bounds, as well as the bearings of such a system upon the political development of the dependencies themselves—these are matters upon which French experience throws considerable light. France was made to do service in the nineteenth century as a “laboratory for political experiments;” and her experiments in the direction of the political assimilation of dependent territories, although they have perhaps failed to attract their proper share of public attention, have not been without important value to students of comparative politics.